

Let's Make It Worse Quicker?

Posted on 27/12/2019 by zerothly

Back in the day, although I'm not sure which day it was exactly but certainly by the 1980s, certain revolutionary socialists advocated voting Conservative "to frustrate the working class into revolution". This did not work. Not only were there too few people actually doing this for it to have any meaningful effect, but also a lot of the "working class" were very keen on what the Tory government were doing anyway and wanted more of it, or rather, more of what they perceived the Conservatives to be doing. Despite not having any discernible effect, many people continued to advocate and take steps of this kind, where they worked directly against the apparent direction of progress in order to provoke chaos and a kind of catastrophic collapse in society which would then push things the other way.

This isn't new. It was in fact something Karl Marx suggested when he supported free trade. However, Marx can be wrong and the world has changed in many ways, though unfortunately often not in the right ways. Speaking of "right", this approach, known as "accelerationism", has left- and right-wing versions. Right-accelerationism can be largely traced to my former personal tutor at Warwick, the notorious Nick Land. Now I could've spent ages ploughing through the guy's turgid prose but instead I've decided to try to summarise roughly where he's coming from and why his opinions are problematic, along with giving you a little bit of context about my situation at the time and how it impinges on these things. Someone asked me what I remembered of him, so here goes.

Nick Land is a couple of years older than me. He gained his PhD in the early 1980s and became an academic at the University of Warwick, known at the time as "Margaret Thatcher's favourite university". More specifically, he was in the Philosophy department, as was I as a postgraduate. Warwick University Philosophy Department is unusual for being in the Faculty of Social Studies. Land's interests seemed, as far as I can tell, to be Nietzsche, Heidegger and himself, not necessarily in that order, and also of course Deleuze and Guattari along with their schizoanalysis. As I've said before, imagine there's a psychiatrist and someone diagnosed as schizophrenic in the same room together, "somewhere out of context and beyond all consequences", to quote Suzanne Vega. In such a situation neither way of experiencing the situation has priority, and the schizophrenic's view of circumstances is as significant or meaningful as the psychiatrist's. That thought experiment is kind of what schizoanalysis is about. He was notably, and disappointingly, very dismissive and cynical about Heidegger's 'Sein und Zeit', which as far as I was concerned was by far the most lucid and incisive analysis of being. Unfortunately Heidegger was also a Nazi, and not just a cautious acquiescent Nazi but an enthusiastic one. A possibly fruitful area of criticism for this issue is his emphasis on Sein-zum-Tode rather than natality. This Nazism would, however, probably not constitute a problem for Land.

As a person, Nick came across to me initially as a rather energetic but also laid-back personal tutor with an almost hippie-like attitude. I remember him leaping up in his chair and folding his legs before sitting back down again in that position. He was playful and humorously dismissive. It felt like he didn't take anything seriously. There's a lot to be said for not taking anything too seriously. I've tried it myself. That said, it doesn't really sit well with the onerous responsibilities I saw as pertaining to the task of being a philosopher. I would also say that his attitude to Friedrich Nietzsche was very appropriate in some ways, as he saw the guy's views as implying that if you really do take the role of philosophy seriously in modern society you'll probably end up in prison or a mental hospital, which strikes me as about right. However, he also tried to make a distinction between those parts of Nietzsches philosophy which were to be taken seriously and those which were the result of "syphilis melting his brain". There's a common cut-off date with Nietzsches writing from the point where he ventured downstairs to stop someone whipping a horse, and is considered to have, to be politically incorrect, "lost his marbles". I've long thought that this was a big mistake, and one Land himself made, because there's still the subjective experience of

“being mad” and the possibility of the influence being significant when he was younger means one should take the entire body of Nietzsches work seriously. If you’re going to distinguish between the mad bits and the sane bits, you’re not sufficiently exploring the possibility of madness as positive and are also imposing your own views in a way which may not hold together. Of course, not holding together would probably be fine with Nick.

When I presented the idea of writing a dissertation on comparing dialectic and supervenience to him, he didn’t really take it up and run with it and asked me if some Socialist Workers’ Party bloke in the Politics department had had a hand in it. He had not, so I took it to Andrew Benjamin instead. I actually felt quite railroaded into writing about dialectic and supervenience when I didn’t really feel I owned the subject and felt like it was something I could do, but which wasn’t really central to the issues which needed to be addressed. In fact my general impression of Warwick University Philosophy Department in general and Nick in particular is that rather than wanting to change the world, it and he seemed to be much more concerned with constructing obscurantists excuses for why global capitalism was absolutely fine, immortal and inevitable. Hence the seeds of what was going to happen later were already germinating at this point.

Just one more personal note: he was apparently quite afraid of my then-partner, probably because of her combination of intelligence, learning, genuine concern and Green Left political radicalism and feminism. Speaking of feminism, one of the oddities of the later Ccru – Cybernetic Culture Research Unit – was that it included both him and Sadie Plant, cyberfeminist and Situationist. However, it soon became very much Nick’s baby and was disowned by the University, taking up residence in Aleister Crowley’s old house in nearby Leamington Spa. By this point, Warwick was far behind me and I was raising a family in Leicester and training to become a herbalist, having decided that a better way to change the world was to parent responsibly and pursue a modality of healing less sullied by the alienation of use and exchange value than allopathic medicine.

It’s still possible that I was onto something politically with supervenience and dialectic. Some feel that Marxism has unnecessary baggage in the form of dialectical materialism and it would be interesting to see what it looked like were it to be restated in terms of the analytic concept of supervenience. Although this might seem to lack dynamism, the view that time supervenes on change might be of assistance here. Given what else was going on in the department at the time, it might have been rather unfortunate that I bailed out of academia so early, because Nick’s views are now seen as an important influence on the manosphere and the alt-right, and also on white supremacist violence. Not surprising that he didn’t engage much with the problem of Heideggers Nazi connections I suppose.

Two impressions Warwick left me with were that people were repeatedly saying the same thing over and over again in different ways and that there was a lot of sycophancy and a tendency to be seen as being interested in the Right Things. These Right Things emphatically did not include veganism, social injustice and equality, and to my mind that made it worthless. It didn’t occur to me at the time that it might be worse than worthless.

It’s been noted that the more management-speak and psychobabble there is in the publications of a corporation, the more likely that corporation is to be corrupt. That, to my mind, applies just as well to Philosophy, Lacan being one of the people who springs to mind. Nick is another such example. The density of his writing is, I think, a mask for this now rather obviously reactionary views. I’m not saying anything controversial when I observe that the Dark Enlightenment is anti-egalitarian, and that was there in the early days too when I objected to the idea of an elite, and he replied that elitism was exactly what he wanted. One of his aphorisms, published in the Warwick Journal of Philosophy, was “Oh the banality. But look at the fervour in his eyes: he is draining himself”, which strikes me as simultaneously particularly nasty and possibly referring to me. He has no compassion, or at least I never saw any. Moreover, after I had decided that part of my problem at Warwick was that I had smoked too much weed in the preceding year, he proceeded not only to drive himself round the bend with speed but also apparently to sell it to students, and yet somehow this catapulted him forward into success and fame.

I’m trying to settle down and describe his Dark Enlightenment, hyper-racism and the like, so here goes. The central planks of the Dark Enlightenment are that democracy and egalitarianism are the enemies of freedom. This ideology is the product of Mencius Moldbug and Nick Land. Nick’s tweets today read like a typical member of the alt-right. For instance, he celebrated the defeat of the Labour Party in the recent election and is openly and proudly

transphobic – not that transphobia is necessarily a bad thing but it is typical of the Right more than the Left as they're currently constituted. Nick describes himself as “hyper-racist”. He believes in ethnically homogenous micro-states with what he refers to as “the refuse” outside them. He's very keen on eugenics. He's also the inspiration for a number of mass shooters such as Anders Brevik and the rally in South Carolina, i.e. those described by Trump as “fine people”. The idea certainly doesn't seem to be about accelerating capitalism to force it to collapse, if it ever was.

But of course the question is, what should we have instead? For me the question is, could I have done something about this? I'm not going to develop a Messiah complex or an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, but it seems nevertheless to me that had I been able to extend my thought in greater depth, maybe I could've contributed to some kind of countercurrent. But in my current addled state I will never know.

5 Comments

5 thoughts on “Let's Make It Worse Quicker?”

1.

Sarada Gray says:

27/12/2019 at 5:16 pm

I'm on board with everything in this post except the statement that 'transphobia is not necessarily a bad thing'. Explain.

REPLY

1.

zerothly says:

27/12/2019 at 5:46 pm

I mean it's called transphobia but that may be too broad a description. For instance, you and I have some sympathy with J K Rowling's position but that would fall under the heading of “transphobia” to many. So I'm looking at Nick's twitter feed and seeing what might be seen as transphobia, but is it? I feel that we're forced to use the word because we don't have a better term for it, and it's rather Orwellian. Very like TERF in fact.

REPLY

2.

zerothly says:

27/12/2019 at 5:54 pm

For example, what do you make of this?

<https://twitter.com/Outsideness/status/1206866814862364672> (His handle is Outsideness)

REPLY

2.

steverobinson56 says:

27/12/2019 at 8:44 pm

You had an interesting time at PhD. Clearly, I've never heard of this bloke, but if I believe what you wrote then he has had an influence in getting bad things done. But I shouldn't beat yourself up about not doing anything to stop him. Firstly, at the time you couldn't have known how things would transpire. Second, your ability to see all sides of a debate actually would have made you weaker. You would have spent too much time worrying about any little bit that made sense to you rather than argue against the whole picture. To prove this, in a sense, was your decision to leave the field completely in order to train in herbalism; i.e. avoid the growing conflict of ideas in order to focus on something that you thought might help people physically, rather than influencing them with thoughts. In a sense you were both right and wrong. With herbalism you can help a few individuals, but with philosophy you can't help or hurt anybody unless you can cut through the fancy, abstract sounding

words that most people dont understand. And that is something, by your own admission, you are not good at. So whatever you might have tried back then would not have worked. For the reason I just described and because this bloke seems extremely focused and uncaring what other people think. You cant beat a bloke who doesnt care. Look at Trump. Look at Boris. Dont beat yourself up. You are not supergirl.

REPLY

1.

zerothly says:

28/12/2019 at 7:16 am

Thanks, that's really nice of you. I did study philosophy in order to make a difference. There was a gap year before this which I spent trying to decide whether to do postgrad but my partner at the time had too much influence on what I chose to do specifically. Also, there were "life lessons" in my experience which I wish I'd learnt outside academia before I plunged back in and had them there (e.g. you have to start off towing the line before you can break out on your own). And don't worry, I don't let it get to me that much.

But yes, unfortunately he is influential. He's been cited as an influence on white supremacist mass murderers and the race riot in South Carolina 😞 .

REPLY

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